

Martha and I recently had the opportunity to get away together for about a week. I headed out a couple days before she did and, between you and me, I lived like a bachelor. Clothes were scattered, I slept until noon, and the dinner menu was indulgent (it was delightful). But all that changed when a message came across my phone.

“I am on my way.” That was the text I received from Martha to let me know that she was on the plane that would bring her to me. That was also the message that changed everything. You see, I started living differently when I knew Martha would soon be here. Here imminent arrival affected two things: my heart and my actions. My anticipation of being together was a cause for joy, and my behavior changed because of it. I cleaned up the house and cleaned up my act. After a couple of days living for me, I started to live *expecting* Martha to arrive.

Over 2,000 years ago, there was a different set of messages sent to announce the pending arrival of another very important person. They were not sent via text, but through the words of the angel Gabriel, the Holy Spirit, a heavenly host, and even the prophetic words of an Old Testament exile. They all declared that a special child was to be born. Their messages referred to him as the Son of the Most High, the Christ, the consolation of Israel, the king of the Jews, and Immanuel. His name was Jesus.

Starting this Sunday, as we enter into the Christmas season to celebrate the birth of our Savior, we begin a new series called *Expecting*. We will take a look at the characters of the Christmas story to learn about the messages they received and the way they lived *expecting* the arrival of baby Jesus.

Advent is a time to prepare our hearts to treasure Christ. As we do, my prayer is that we will learn from these early saints and consider how we are living our lives in light of the arrival of our Savior. **When Jesus is expected, lives change.** And, like them, I pray that this Christmas season will be a time to experience the joy, peace, and hope of giving our lives to the God who gave himself to us and living our lives with the God who came to be with us.

[Luke 1:26-27] ²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary.

In the passage just before this one, the angel Gabriel had announced that Mary’s relative Elizabeth was to have a child (who will become John the Baptist). Elizabeth is six months pregnant when Mary has her encounter with Gabriel.

Gabriel is sent from God. He is bringing a message from heaven to Nazareth. The mother of Jesus was not from a well-to-do, high-ranking family from the heart of Jerusalem. She was a humble girl from a humble village not well thought of in Israel and likely unknown to Luke’s readers. It is the last place you’d look for royalty, and it is an indication that the Messiah of Israel won’t arrive as many suspect and won’t live the life many are anticipating.

We are told that Mary is betrothed to Joseph. That means she is probably 13-14 years of age, which is remarkable given the way she responds. Mary’s life is heading in a certain direction. She is on

her way to living a traditional life of a young Jewish girl. There is nothing extraordinary about her or the life she is living. But the message she is about to receive changes all of that.

[Luke 1:28-36] ²⁸ And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” ³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” ³⁵ And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.”

If an angelic being is going to visit you, Gabriel’s greeting is what you hope to hear. He refers to Mary as a favored one and informs her that God is with her. Regardless, she is troubled and is trying to figure out what this means. Luke portrays her as thoughtful and pondering, not panicked and terrified. Frankly, I’d be freaking out! Mary is likely asking the question “What does God want with me?” It’s like when you get a call on your cell phone from someone you don’t normally hear from and wonder why on earth they are calling you, even to the point of worry.

The angel reassures her she has nothing to fear. This will be a common encouragement to all of those involved in the Christmas story. Waiting, expecting, and anticipating often includes anxiety and fear, but not with Jesus. Zechariah, Joseph, and the shepherds will all be visited and the message they receive will include “Do not be afraid.” That’s because **when you encounter God on the basis of his grace, you have nothing to fear.** God’s favored can be free from fear.

Gabriel’s message is nothing short of astounding. A special child was to be born through Mary. His name was to be Jesus, and Gabriel described how he was to be unique.

This child is miraculous in his conception. Gabriel tells Mary she will conceive and give birth to a son. But Mary asks a question that is not one of doubt but one of wonder. How will this happen since she is a virgin? She has not known a man. Gabriel explains that she will become pregnant through the power of God and the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. This does not have a sexual connotation. This is the presence and power of God resting upon Mary in the same way the Shekinah Glory rested on the tabernacle, and it’s the same word Luke 9 uses to describe the way the cloud overshadowed the disciples on the mount of transfiguration.

Jesus’ conception could come about in no other way. The sexual union of a man and woman would not be sufficient to incarnate the eternal Son of God, nor would it be sufficient to create a holy being. This was a creative, active, miraculous work of God accomplished out of necessity. You and I are separated from God because of sin. We are helpless, with all creation, to save ourselves, so God broke into history to execute his plan of salvation and provide for us what we could not provide for ourselves. He did this by being born of Mary.

This child is divine in his character. Gabriel describes Jesus as great and holy. “Great” is an overused word in English. We ascribe it to mundane things like milk being on sale. I think the original Greek word is a better descriptor: mega. Megastores are giant stores. Megaphones enhance and propel a normal voice. A megaplex has dozens of movie screens. A computer chip that can hold an incredible amount of data is measured in megabytes. And who can forget the awesome 80’s-90’s heavy metal band Megadeth, who rocked like no other? There is something about that word that expresses largeness, excellence, supremacy, out of the ordinary, and, yes, greatness. In fact, when mega is used by itself in the Old Testament, it almost exclusively refers to God. Jesus will be mega. Gabriel is telling Mary her son surpasses all others because of who he is and what he’s been sent to do.

He also says Jesus is holy. Now, when we normally read that word about humans, we understand it to mean set apart for service to God. God makes us holy, set apart by him, to live a life for him. We also use it to describe God, and understand it to mean wholly different, wholly other. Jesus is both. Jesus is set apart for service to God, and it’s his holiness that makes him capable of accomplishing that work. For God’s perfect justice to be satisfied, a perfect sacrifice was required. A sexual union between man and woman would not be sufficient to create a suitable sacrifice because all humans have been tainted by sin. So God moved to conceive a child in Mary’s womb through the power of the Holy Spirit. Her child would be born untainted by the stain of sin in order to pay for the penalty of sin. **Jesus, who is God, was born of a virgin by the power of God, to satisfy what could only be satisfied by God, to pay our debt so that we could be with God.**

This child is royal in his calling. Gabriel says Jesus will be a king. He will sit on a throne, reign over a people, and his kingdom will last forever. While this may sound like the makings of a good fairy tale, the message would resonate with a Jew who knew her scriptures, because this is language of the Messiah. In 1 Chronicles 17, Nathan the prophet is addressing King David, and gives him the following prophecy from God.

[1 Chronicles 17:11-14] ¹¹ When your days are fulfilled to walk with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹² He shall build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever. ¹³ I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from him who was before you, ¹⁴ but I will confirm him in my house and in my kingdom forever, and his throne shall be established forever.”

Gabriel’s words are the announcement of Israel’s Messiah because Jesus will sit on David’s throne. Jesus will reign over the house of Judah (which is Israel), and Jesus’ kingdom will have no end. The Messiah God has promised to Israel, the savior God has promised to the world, is about to come. So how will Mary respond? As she was soon to be expecting, how did she live her life from this point forward? As we prepare our hearts for Christmas, what can we learn from her in how we should respond? What we’ll see from her is:

When the Messiah is expected, devotion, praise, and joy follow. I told you earlier that Mary is likely a young teenager. Her response to Gabriel’s astounding message is equally astounding.

[Luke 1:38] ³⁸ And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

Somewhere during this conversation, we may expect Mary to stop and say, “Can we start again from the top?” But she doesn’t. She is able to receive this news because, to some extent, she is already expecting it. By all appearances, Mary is a devout Jew who knows her scriptures. She has already been expecting Israel’s deliverer to come. Now, the means by which he arrives may be shocking, but Mary is able to say “I am the servant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word” because she knows God’s Word and is compelled by his character and promises.

We too can live devoted to the Lord because of his character and promises. But we can only do that if we know what they are. Oftentimes, our anxiety around God is because of our uncertainty of what he has said. I often get the chance to speak with people who are struggling with God because of a number of reasons and, frequently, it’s because of confusion around who he is and what he has promised. So when I get an opportunity to show them what God’s Word says, it often results in the phrase, “Oh, I didn’t know He said that. That’s really encouraging to hear.” Like Mary, **we can surrender our lives for God when we know what to expect from God.**

Mary is also able to live with devotion because she is propelled by the provision of God. Gabriel says she has been given God’s presence, God’s favor, and God’s power to live faithfully as she anticipates the arrival of the Messiah. Gabriel tells Mary “the Lord is with you”. She does not have to bear this responsibility on her own. She is told twice of God’s favor. Favor is based on the same word as grace. That means that, not only is God with her, he is for her. She didn’t do anything to merit that favor and there’s nothing she can do to lose it. She is in this position because God placed her there. And he promises his power. Gabriel references the pregnancy of Mary’s relative Elizabeth as a sign that nothing is impossible with God. Elizabeth is old and been unable to bear children. But, by God’s power, she has become pregnant. The power that allowed her to become pregnant is the same power that will conceive in Mary’s womb.

Each of us is called to bring Jesus into the world. It isn’t through the labor of childbirth, but it is through the labor of offering ourselves completely over to God. If you are a follower of Jesus, it means you have been chosen by God and set apart by him for service to him. The encouragement of the story of Mary is that our Lord does not look on our merits to decide if we qualify to work in his salvation program. Mary was a poor, humble girl from an insignificant village, yet God chose her for this most special of assignments. Your background, your upbringing, your marital status, your wealth, your education, and your limitations are insignificant to you being given a holy assignment from the Lord. You qualify for service because God qualifies you for that service. You have God’s favor because he has given it to you freely. **Believe God when he says he has something for you to do.**

We can also live a life of faithful expectation with Jesus because he provides to us what he provided to Mary. Before the resurrected Jesus ascended to heaven, he gave the promise God gives to all who would devote their lives to him: I will be with you. Additionally, he promised that we would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon us. **We can all declare we are servants of the Lord when we live expecting God to be who he says he is and do what he said he will do.**

I am reminded of some missionaries who are having a very difficult time where they are serving right now; fierce opposition and dangerous circumstances. But they press on, relying on the presence and power of God, and continuing to declare they are servants of the Lord. And when we live devoted to Jesus in the expectation of his promises, praise and joy are sure to follow. After this encounter, Mary travels to be with Elizabeth. After being blessed by Elizabeth, Mary sings a song of praise called the Magnificat. Take a look at just the first two verses.

[Luke 1:46-47] ⁴⁶ And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

This song is the fruit of devotion to the Lord. A life devoted to the Lord is a life that exalts the Lord. Gabriel said Jesus would be great, the original word being *mega*. Here Mary says her soul magnifies the Lord. Magnifies is *megalyno*. The deepest, most intimate part of Mary, her soul, declares God’s greatness, and she experiences joy knowing that God is her Savior. When you trust in the promises of God because you realize your hope resides only in him, your response is praise and joy.

You know, there was one main reason I changed when Martha sent me that text. It’s because I wanted to be with her. And as I sat waiting for her, the anticipation grew, and when the promise of her arrival was realized when she walked out those doors, I rejoiced in my soul. Sappy, I know. But true. For Mary, she was about to begin a nine-month season of expecting...not just expecting a baby, but expecting the birth of her Messiah, whom she longed to be with. That’s what Advent is all about, expecting the arrival of our Savior. Anticipating being with God and preparing our hearts for that moment. He has promised he’s coming. And he always keeps his promises. Let us spend this season preparing ourselves for his arrival.